

2008 Colorado River Corridor/Blythe Restoration Project

How the project will sustain OHV Recreation or OHV Opportunities:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office (PSSC FO) manages 1,500 miles of Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) routes on over 1.65 million acres of public lands. This field office has successfully undertaken numerous, large-scale desert restoration projects to enhance sustainable OHV recreation. The mandate of multiple use management challenges the BLM to balance the ever-increasing demand for OHV recreational opportunities with conservation efforts in a way that protects valuable cultural, biological and wilderness resources. Resource damage, such as destruction of protected habitat caused by a limited number of OHV-users, has led to the criticism of the entire OHV community. BLM efforts to facilitate responsible OHV recreational opportunities incorporate a multifaceted approach which includes law enforcement; public outreach; signage of legal routes; closure of unauthorized routes; and restoration of lands damaged by illegal OHV activity. Restoration projects are an essential part of this equation because they serve to augment responsible OHV opportunity and demonstrate to the public how OHV dollars support the protection of public land. By restoring natural resources, this project will reduce user conflict, enhance public awareness, and sustain legal OHV opportunities in the local area.

Need for Project:

Located in Riverside County north of Blythe, California, this area consists of a network of authorized and unauthorized OHV routes extending west of Highway 95 and toward the Big Maria Mountains, Riverside Mountains and Rice Valley Wilderness Areas. The popularity of the Colorado River has increased the presence of OHV users in this area and intensified environmental damage off authorized routes. Impacted areas include not only wilderness, but also many significant historic and prehistoric sites outside of wilderness. Among these sites are the world renowned Blythe Intaglios—giant, prehistoric figures on the earth's surface, best viewed from the sky. Unfortunately, unchecked OHV use is destroying these figures at an unknown rate. OHV use is also affecting important habitat for the BLM sensitive Mojave fringed-toed lizard and the federally threatened desert tortoise.

The increased burden of illegal OHV activity in this area is undermining the extensive efforts of law enforcement and former hand crews that secured the wilderness boundaries. Restoration efforts will focus on closing unauthorized routes within and around wilderness boundaries and the Big Maria Area of Critical Concern (ACEC) to defend wilderness values, protect wildlife habitat and limit further destruction of cultural sites.

Size and Description of Project:

This project will restore public lands within a 175,000-acre project area within Riverside County. The project includes areas in and around the Big Maria ACEC

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and the Big Maria Mountains, Riverside Mountains and Rice Valley Wilderness Areas. This project will restore desert habitat impacted by unauthorized hill climbs, routes, and trails in areas not designated as open routes of travel. The PSSC FO will prioritize restoration sites to maximize the protection of special-status species habitat, cultural sites and wilderness areas damaged by illegal OHV activity.

Regeneration in the desert is naturally a slow process and requires long-term strategies. Restoration treatments will incorporate methods such as pitting, ripping and mulching. These proven methods not only improve water infiltration and soil conditions, but to trap windblown seeds and provide critical shading to growing plants. These methods in conjunction with the collection and distribution of native seed sources at appropriate sites efficiently and economically facilitate natural regeneration in the desert. Restoration methods used by field crews that blend in routes with the surrounding natural environment have proven successful in alleviating OHV non-compliance in certain situations.

Many of the areas addressed in this current grant request, however, have characteristics such as wide-open terrain in combination with persistent OHV trespass, which require a more rigorous approach. Heavy equipment will establish physical barriers to discourage illegal OHV activity and better delineate closure and significant cultural sites. Physical barriers may include large boulders, post and cable fencing, or pipe fencing, which will partly be made of recycle material. Field crews will restore the entire line-of-sight behind physical barriers at restoration sites. This will discourage future OHV intrusion and facilitate natural processes. Cultural sites will be fenced and left undisturbed.

The development and placement of interpretive signs will inform the public of important boundaries, designated routes and natural resources to support the protection of restoration sites. Law enforcement patrol and monitor these sites to encourage OHV compliance.

Project Cooperation:

The Colorado River Working Group was developed following the Winter 2006 Grant Hearings, and involves partnership projects between five BLM offices, three which manage California Desert District Areas, (Needles, Palm Springs, El Centro) and two Arizona offices which manage California lands on the western side of the Colorado River (Yuma FO, and the Lake Havasu District Office). The Colorado River Working Group proposed this OHV restoration project as a cooperative effort between the Palm Springs (as lead) and Yuma field offices, with involvement of other agencies such as the Bureau of Reclamation and the Palo Verde Irrigation District.

Land Use and Environmental Compliance:

No restoration will occur on routes currently open and designated for OHV use. Congressional statute closes all wilderness areas to motorized equipment.

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Route designation and other closure sites were administratively determined through land use plans, including the California Desert Conservation Area Plan Amendments (CDCA) 2002, and the Northern & Eastern Colorado Desert Coordinated Management Plan (NECO) 2002. All work will conform to applicable policies, regulations and land use plans. Restoration efforts will take place in varied natural communities from desert scrub and desert wash to dune ecosystems. Prior to restoration, the BLM restoration ecologist will survey each restoration site to determine the most successful and cost-effective course of action. All restoration sites will undergo cultural and biological ground surveys and site-specific environmental analysis in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Success Criteria and Project Monitoring:

OHV compliance and restored natural conditions improve long-term plant diversity and critical wildlife habitat. This project aims to preserve both cultural sites and wilderness areas for the enjoyment of future generations. Restored sites will receive monitoring for overall effectiveness using GIS-based data collection and photo-point methods established by a workgroup of BLM staff from the California Desert District and the State Office in September 2004. Success criteria implemented will measure site improvement to natural conditions and increased OHV compliance as determined by a reduction in OHV trespass and site damage. BLM sustains site integrity through routine maintenance, staff monitoring, and law enforcement patrols. This grant will fund short-term monitoring and repairs of restored sites; permanent BLM staff will provide long-term site care.

Anticipated Timeline:

Time	Description
June 2008	Begin hiring personnel to prioritize restoration sites and develop strategies.
August 2008	Begin surveying restoration sites for sensitive resources and preparing environmental documentation.
March 2009	Hire contractors and purchase equipment. Begin installing barriers.
October 2009	Hire restoration hand crew to begin restoration and monitor physical barriers.
May 2010	All restoration work complete
December 2010	Short-term monitoring and maintenance complete